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AUTHOR Rauch, Margaret; Fillenworth, Ceil
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ABSTRACT

The paired course instructional model can help high risk students succeed by enabling them to become aware of themselves as independent learners and to enhance transfer of learning from a reading course to a general education course. In order to examine the effectiveness of this model, and focus on a reading center's participation in the paired course instructional model, a study analyzed the data from reading rate improvement and reading/study skills courses offered by the Reading Center at St. Cloud University, St. Cloud, Minnesota. High risk students, those that did not meet the regular admissions requirements of the University, answered questionnaires on their perception of the University's Division of General Studies program (a program which provided special advising and academic assistance through the paired course instructional model). The students' grade point averages were also examined. Results revealed that the paired course instructional model has a positive effect on the academic achievement of many high risk freshmen students, but that students who continue to struggle academically need to be carefully monitored, with appropriate intervention measures provided continuously. (MS)

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Margaret Rauch
&
Ceil Fillenworth

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Paired courses: An instructional model designed to enhance academic success

Margaret Rauch and Ceil Fillenworth
St. Cloud University
St. Cloud, Minnesota

Many students who enroll in a college or university need academic support to succeed in their courses. These students are often recognized as high risk students. The question becomes:What can be done to help these students succeed?

At St. Cloud State University, high risk students are defined as students who do not meet the regular admission requirements of the University; that is, they did not graduate in the upper half of their high school class. These students may be admitted to the University through the Division of General Studies, a program which provided special advising and academic assistance through the paired course instructional model. This model was selected because of the positive effects on students' academic achievement attained by other colleges and universities using the paired course concept (Hisrich, 1982; Martin & Blanc, 1981; Tomlinson & Tomlinson, 1975; Wilson, 1978).

In addition, Keimig (1983) discussed implications from research regarding successful learning programs which supported the paired course instructional model. Successful programs were comprehensive and incorporated within the "academic mainstream of the college or university." Administrators and faculty, both content area and developmental educators, interacted to share planning and solve problems. Learning assistance was integrated within academic courses.

Characteristics of successful learning programs were incorporated into the Division of General Studies program and the paired course instructional model, one of the main components of the programs. Goals of the paired course instructional model are to help students become aware of themselves as independent learners and to enhance transfer of learning.

Paired Courses

Along with their other courses, students within the Division of General Studies must select paired courses. Specifically, each student is required to select a core course in either English, speech, or reading paired with a general education course in areas such as philosophy, theatre, or history.

The remainder of this paper will focus upon the Reading Center's participation in the paired course instructional model. The discussion which follows describes this participation and presents results reflecting on the effectiveness of the model.

Students may enroll in two courses offered through the Reading Center: reading rate improvement and reading/study skills. Each course is offered for two credits. Reading/study skills focuses on time management, notetaking, study strategies, and test taking. Reading rate improvement focuses on efficient reading techniques and emphasizes comprehension and vocabulary development.

Sections of the two reading courses are paired with general education courses such as criminal justice, sociology, political science, industry, geography, biology, psychology and history. From experience gained during the first year in the program, it was decided that for fall quarter, only the reading/study skills course should be paired. Incoming freshmen needed the

greatest help with notetaking skills, study strategies, and preparing for examinations. During winter and spring quarters, both reading/study skills and reading rate improvement were paired with general education courses.

Instructors Working Together

To succeed, the paired course instructional model must have support and close cooperation between paired instructors. When paired instructors meet to discuss their courses, they share information on textbooks, course content, teaching styles, papers, projects, numbers and types of tests, and various difficulties students may encounter with those particular courses. The reading instructor discusses how the reading course could be coordinated with its paired course. The reading instructor requests a copy of the textbook, syllabus, and extra materials such as handouts used by the paired colleague. Thereafter, the two instructors meet or have telephone conferences to discuss student progress and the continuing coordination of teaching efforts.

Generally, the reading course adapts to its paired course. One reason for this is the disparity in class size. Between 25 and 30 students are enrolled in the reading courses whereas the general education courses may have an enrollment of 25 to several hundred students. If the class size is identical, that is, the same students, it is easy for both instructors to make adjustments. However, if the other course has 180 students, 25 of whom are enrolled in the reading class, more adjustments will be made by the reading instructor.

By adapting to the other course, the reading instructor explicitly links the two courses through use of the content in the general education course while teaching the reading course. For example, in a reading/study skills and geography pair, the geography instructor tested students on geographical knowledge of different sections of the world each week. Therefore, the reading instructor arranged the course schedule in order to teach the study strategies unit first. The initial component of this unit included organizational ideas which would enhance learning and remembering information needed for the geography tests.

Another example of paired courses involved a reading/study skills course paired with an introductory industry course. In the industry course, over 90% of the test material was taken from lectures; therefore, the reading instructor taught a notetaking unit first, stressing the Cornell Method (Pauk, 1984). Before teaching the notetaking unit, the reading instructor attended the industry class and took notes. These notes served as a model for the discussion on notetaking during the reading class. Finally, the reading instructor asked students who had achieved high grades in the industry class to give their notes to the Reading Center. These notes are kept on file and are used as models for students experiencing notetaking problems. These examples show that, in effect, the reading/study skills classes adapted to the other classes.

When the reading class is paired with another class enrolling a large number of students, the instructor of the large class attends and participates in at least one session of the reading class. Since both geography and industry are large classes, these instructors attended the paired reading/study skills class and discussed various aspects of their courses. These aspects included problems students may encounter in their classes and suggestions for resolving them. For example, in the geography class there is an extensive amount of information to remember for each weekly test. A common problem is time management; that is, many students attempted to cram the night before the exam, an ineffective study strategy. Effective study strategies were discussed, and the geography instructor told the students how to listen for

key concepts when he is presenting information in class. Three instructors team teach the industry course, and one of the instructors used a basic outline on overhead transparencies. A common problem for students is that they would copy the outline from the transparency but did not record all of the information was needed to understand the concepts presented and to review for tests. Another industry professor emphasized that students should listen carefully when he introduced vocabulary because terms would be included in the exams. Following these visits by the geography and industry instructors, the reading instructor discussed strategies successful students used to learn the information and to achieve good grades in the courses.

Instructors and Tutors Working Together

The Reading Center operates a limited peer tutoring program. Many of the tutors have taken the reading courses and/or have completed the general education courses with which the reading courses are paired. Currently, two of the eight tutors have taken paired courses.

Tutors play an important role in the instructional process. If the tutor has completed the general education course, the tutor works as both a tutor and teaching assistant. Tutoring activities include scheduling small group and individual sessions with students referred by the reading instructors. Teaching assistant activities include attending the reading classes and answering students' questions concerning tests and assignments and helping students develop strategies in preparing for tests.

There are many advantages when tutors who have completed the general education courses paired with reading courses work with students. Tutors may suggest specific notetaking and study strategies which can help students attain a better understanding of the material and thus a better test score. Tutors also provide encouragement and peer support. The tutors have been helpful to the reading instructors because they provide a perception of the courses from the students perspective.

Advisors Working Together

Some of the instructors teaching paired courses also serve as academic advisors for Division of General Studies students. In order to become better acquainted with their students, the instructors of the reading and psychology paired courses decided to experiment with the advising process. Specifically, they requested that their advisees consist of the students enrolled in their paired courses fall quarter, 1986. This arrangement was effective because it was easier to become acquainted with their advisees and help ease the students' transition into their freshman year at the University. This arrangement was also effective when preparing for winter quarter registration. During class, the reading instructor discussed what students needed to do to prepare for advance registration. After that, each student scheduled an individual conference with the assignment advisor, either the reading or psychology instructor, to plan an academic program for winter quarter. If there were any additional questions, students could talk with the instructors before or after class.

A different procedure was used when advising students for spring quarter registration because none of the advisees were enrolled in the reading instructor's winter quarter classes. A letter was sent to all the advisees scheduling an appointment to discuss their academic program. Since a comfortable relationship had been established during fall quarter, it was much easier to work with the students.

Results

Data on students' achievements and students' perception of the program have been collected. This data includes grade point averages and students' perception of both the Division of General Studies program and the reading classes.

Division of General Studies Questionnaire

During fall quarter, 1984, students were surveyed as to their perceptions of the Division of General Studies program. The reading instructors analyzed results from questions pertaining to the reading area and made changes, where appropriate, in the reading program. For example, one change involved increasing the explicit linkage between the paired courses. A second change included helping students to realize that the general education instructors would be happy to discuss their problems and answer questions. Since the reading classes usually enrolled fewer students than the general education classes, it was understandable that students felt the reading instructors were more accessible. Having the instructors of the general education classes attend the reading classes helped students to see the linkage between the classes and to realize that both instructors were concerned about the students' academic progress. In addition, the reading instructors informed students when the pairs instructors conferred and explained what was discussed. These changes enhanced students' awareness of the interaction between paired instructors and helped students to realize that both instructors wanted to help them. The changes were reflected in the positive results from the 1985 questionnaire.

Teacher Evaluation

Students in paired and regular reading courses complete a teacher evaluation anonymously at the end of the quarter. There is a major difference between how these two groups of students came to be in the reading courses. Students in the Division of General Studies are required to take paired courses. In contrast, other students self select the reading courses. The instructors did not want the students enrolled in the paired reading sections to feel labeled, stigmatized, or somehow different from other students. Therefore, the evaluations from both groups of students were analyzed to determine if there was a discrepancy in attitude. The overall results were positive. Results from the following four questions taken from the fall quarter, 1985, questionnaire reflect the positive nature of the responses.

1. 97% of the students in the paired study skills sections (N=131) and 95% of the students in the nonpaired sections (N=44) believed the instructors seemed concerned with students' progress and were actively helpful.
2. 79% of the students in the paired sections (N=132) and 84% of the students in the nonpaired sections (N=45) felt the objectives they had for taking the course were met.
3. 91% of the students in the paired sections (N=130) and 95% of the students in the nonpaired sections (N=44) felt the instructional methods used by the instructors were effective.
4. 96% of the students in the paired sections (N=132) and 93% of the students in the nonpaired sections (N=45) felt the instructors were readily available for consultation with students.

Grade Point Averages

The University has a minimum cumulative grade point average (GPA) which students must meet to continue in good academic standing. First quarter students must achieve minimum GPA of 1.5. Second quarter students must achieve a minimum cumulative GPA of 1.75. After the third quarter, students must achieve a minimum cumulative GPA of 2.0. If students do not achieve the minimum cumulative GPA, they will be on probation for their following quarter of enrollment. Students who are on probation must achieve a minimum GPA of 2.0.

Although students may begin at the University any quarter, 90.4% of the freshmen enter fall quarter. Statistics for five fall quarters, 1982-1986, revealed that the average GPA of the first quarter freshmen (N=745) enrolled in the paired reading courses was 2.25. One student started during the summer and was classified as a second quarter freshman; this student achieved a 3.0 (B) average. Students achieving a "B" average and above were not required to continue enrolling in paired courses.

Students enrolled in paired reading classes during winter quarter were divided into two groups:first quarter students and second quarter students. The results gathered for four winter quarters, 1983-1986, revealed that the first quarter students (N=9) achieved an average GPA of 1.76. Second quarter students (N=378) achieved an average GPA of 2.08.

Students enrolled in paired reading classes during spring quarter, 1983-1986, were divided into three groups:first quarter students (N=16, average GPA=1.86), second quarter students (N=32, average GPA=1.82), and third quarter students (N=116, average GPA=1.88). A further analysis of the GPAs of third quarter freshmen revealed a sharp contrast in the average GPAs of students who achieved a GPA of 2.0 and above (N=66, average GPA=2.41) and students who achieved less than a 2.0 average (N=50, average GPA=1.20).

Why do many third quarter freshmen experience academic problems spring quarter? Although the University does not have a formally researched answer to this question, the reading instructors know that many of the students enrolled in paired classes experience problems such as time management, carrying a full academic load while working many hours a week, and a passive learning style. However, these problems are not specific only to students enrolled in paired courses. It is obvious that more research needs to be conducted to determine why many students do well and others experience difficulty.

To summarize, the data gathered over several years reveals that the paired course instructional model has a positive effect on the academic achievement of many high risk freshmen students enrolled in paired courses during fall and winter quarters. The results gathered for spring quarters are mixed. While the majority of students do well, students who continue to struggle academically will need to be carefully monitored with appropriate intervention measures provided continuously. This model requires more time to coordinate instruction to ensure transfer of learning; however, paired course instructors completed a questionnaire and indicated they believed the results were worth the extra expenditure of time. Perhaps this is why the student evaluations of the program have been so positive. These evaluations and the positive academic progress of many of the students have resulted in continued administrative and faculty support of the paired course instructional model used within the Division of General Studies program.

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